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University of Dayton Biology Professor Helps State of Ohio Protect Rare Plants

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UNIVERSITY OF DAYTON BIOLOGY PROFESSOR HELPS STATE OF OHIO PROTECT RARE PLANTS

DAYTON, Ohio -- A University of Dayton biology professor has been seen poking around among hickory trees, pines and prairie plants in Hamilton County parks.

A tiptoe through the tulips it's not. For 30 days or so each year for the past three years, James Ramsey has been an eagle eye for the state of Ohio, scouring hundreds of acres during spring, summer and fall looking for rare, endangered and threatened plant life. It's like looking for a needle in a haystack.

"Professor Ramsey has found plants rare in the state that until now, we hadn't known we had," said John Klein, land manager of the Hamilton County Park District.

Klein has reported Ramsey's findings to the Ohio Department of Natural Resources (ODNR) Division of Natural Areas and Preserves, which uses them to update its database of plant locations, revise the state's biannual list of rare native Ohio plants and set priorities for acquiring land with a significant amount of rare plant life, according to Guy Denny, assistant chief of the division.

The information may also be shared with researchers studying ways to propagate rare plants or consultants evaluating the environmental impact of a proposed construction project on an area. Plants on the rare list are given state protection from mowing, clearing and construction, since state or federal funds cannot be used on public works projects that would destroy endangered or threatened species growing in the area, Denny said.

In 1990, Ramsey found a rare mint plant in the district's Newberry Wildlife Sanctuary where a new road had been considered.

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"It became sacred ground," Ramsey said. "There will be no roadway."

Ohio has about 1,800 species of flowering vascular plants. Of these, about 160 are endangered, 180 are threatened and 200 more are potentially threatened. Denny said while the numbers in each category stay about the same from year to year, different plants go on and off the list all the time. In 1990, 10 plants were taken off the list, but five more were added.

"Each year, we'll find more occurrences of something we didn't know we had," Denny said. "Plants we thought were gone, we'll find more of, and plants on the threatened list may become endangered. If (Ramsey) determines that a species is rarer than the state thought it was, (in effect) he's going to give that species protection."

According to Klein, the Hamilton County Park District used to keep the locations of rare plants a secret; however, this policy resulted in many plants being inadvertently destroyed. Mower operators, herbicide sprayers and other park district employees now use maps--based on Ramsey's findings--showing the locations of rare plants so they can help in the protection effort.

Why protect rare plants?

"For the same reason we protect rare art or historic buildings," Denny said. "Having all of these plants gives more diversity around us and enhances our quality of life."

Ramsey said if enough species become extinct, the land will gradually change. "Each species plays a role in the ecological balance. What seems to be something slight going on at the time can have far-reaching consequences."

Besides his consulting, Ramsey has made a further contribution to the park district's preservation efforts. He has scoured his own property in Adams County--which thrives with rare plants--collecting seed for the park district to plant. Ramsey said the seed has helped the district restabilize certain species.

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For interviews, contact **Jim Ramsey** at (513) 229-3011 229-2506 or **John Klein** at (513) 352-4080 or **Guy Denny** at (614) 265-6565. Ramsey, who resides in Waynesville, retires from UD on May 1.